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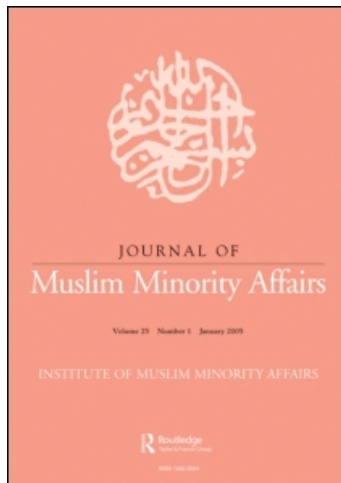
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Dutch-Muslims on the Internet: A New Discussion Platform

LENIE BROUWER

Abstract

This paper examines the use of the Internet as a new public platform for communication that is increasingly being utilized by the Muslim migrant communities in the Netherlands. The paper will review the topics that are currently being articulated and the issues discussed on the Internet. It shall highlight the significant role the new communication medium plays in the lives of young Muslims who are seeking their own response to the challenges of living in a Western society, independent of the older generations. The paper will also show that the users' common interest in Islam unites them on a virtual forum while each participant may also have his or her own individual motives. It will be demonstrated that the mailing list transcends ethnic boundaries while it also establishes links between the gendered communities of men and women, which is facilitated by the anonymity of the Internet services. The paper will show that at a time of increasing hostility towards Muslims in the surrounding society, their sense of community is being strengthened by the use of the powerful medium of communication provided by the Internet.

Introduction

The Internet offers Muslim migrants new public platforms for communication. News-groups and mailing lists make it possible for Muslims to ask for information about Islam and to discuss topics of interest with other believers. Immigrants have always maintained a special bond with such modern communication media as the telephone, cassette recorders, satellite television and videos.¹ By watching satellite television they are able to follow current events in their home country, while videos further facilitate their audio and visual communication and help keep their cultural tradition alive.² Immigrants consume these types of communication technology extensively in order to maintain contact with their homeland and with fellow migrants in other countries. A growing number of international Muslim organizations have set up their own websites, providing visitors with information about Islam as well as a means of communication (chat rooms and mailing lists).³ Media have made available to the public what previously circulated only in narrow, face-to-face settings.⁴ The American portal to Islam (www.islamonline.com) is a good example of such a site.

The Power of the Net

According to political scientist Peter Mandaville, the Internet enables Muslims to take religion more into their own hands and to create a new form of 'imagined community',

a reference to Benedict Anderson's concept.⁵ Mandaville recognizes that we cannot come to such a conclusion simply because many users of the Internet are Muslims, and wonders whether only the setting is new or whether also the topics discussed are new. Mandaville assumes that such 'hybrid discursive spaces like the Internet can give rise to new formulations and critical perspectives on Islam and the status of religious knowledge'.⁶

Eickelman and Anderson also believe that a new sense of collectivity is emerging in Muslim communities world-wide and that the Internet creates new public venues and identities.⁷ Accessible modes of communication have made contests global, so that even local disputes take on transnational dimensions.⁸ Both Anderson and Mandaville compare the emergence of the Internet with the rise of such other media as printed booklets, taped sermons and television. In a sense, all these new media have a down-market quality because they are cheaply produced and, by expanding the public domain, reach more 'folk'.⁹ Anderson describes the way Islam is represented on the Internet by websites which provide information on sermons, Qur'anic texts and prayer times. These debates commonly lead to long discussions about how to combine Islamic requirements with modern life and how to lead a Muslim life in a non-Muslim country.¹⁰ The Internet has expanded the public sphere and opened arenas where 'interpreters' are part of a diversity of views and expressions of Islam today.¹¹

Gary Bunt's extended overview of a great variety of Islamic websites provided insights into many different manifestations of Islam.¹² Bunt emphasized that this virtual space is of special interest to academics who want to analyse contemporary Islamic developments of individual self-perceptions or of specific group expressions.¹³ He discovered that the Internet is especially applied as a means to counter dominant Islamic views: alternative views and minority interpretations of Islam have finally found a voice.¹⁴ Although many Muslims consider certain concepts as universal in Islam and regard the Qur'an as constant and immutable, simultaneously there are many interpretations of these.¹⁵ In addition, cyber Islamic environments provide a sense of commonality, based on shared expressions and understandings, associated with the concept of *ummah* (the Muslim community).¹⁶

Muslim Women on the Web

According to Susan Bastani, computer-mediated communication is a perfect way to unite geographically dispersed people and to offer companionship and support to the participants, who can form a support system with those who share their offline problems.¹⁷ Bastani provides an ethnographic account of an email-based Muslim women's network, which provides a forum for discussing Islamic issues. She subscribed to the list for eight months and scrutinized the posted messages.¹⁸ The network has three types of members: actives, who contribute frequently and consider it their responsibility to keep the discussion alive; passives, who occasionally post a message; and lurkers, who simply read the discussions.¹⁹ The members of this network—6% of whom are converts—are known by their names and addresses.

Discussions on the list were varied and covered many topics, ranging from hobbies to religion.²⁰ Issues faced by Muslim women living in the West came up frequently, such as gender equity, wearing the *hijab* (veil), discrimination and the socializing of men and women. The members held a lively debate about the rights of women both in the household and in the community. They expressed their anger about women's low status in some Muslim communities and perceived it as an abuse of power by the men.

At the same time they challenged existing stereotypes about Muslim women in Western society.²¹ Bastani notes that the list also serves as a source of support, providing information and allowing members to learn from the experiences of others. Members advise each other about family matters, personal relations and computer problems, and this sometimes alleviates feelings of isolation. Women apparently find companionship and a sense of belonging in this online network.²² Members of the list feel very connected to the rest of the Muslim community.²³

The Dutch Forum

Most of the above-mentioned research was focused on international Islamic websites; little is known about the Dutch situation. This paper concerns a mailing list on salaam.nl, a Dutch Islamic website. This site—the first Islamic website in the Netherlands—was launched by a Muslim youth organization in 1996. The mailing list is open to anybody who is interested in Islam. I have subscribed to it for six years now and have followed the sometimes intense debates about a wide variety of issues facing Muslims in a Western, secular country. This article deals with the following questions. What issues do the subscribers on the mailing list discuss and how do they articulate their views? Do the participants only talk about ‘old topics in new settings’—as Mandaville and Anderson wondered—or do new topics come up as a result of the new medium? I first give some background information about the mailing list, and then elaborate on three popular themes that appeared regularly on the list during the research period (1998–2001). Finally, I look at what can be concluded from the debates with respect to the findings in the literature discussed above.

A Local Case Study

Over the past few years, almost every Dutch-Muslim organization has sought to launch its own website. For example, the portal www.islam.startpagina.nl provides sixteen headings with information about organizations, politics, science, mosques, Muslim women and Islam. It provides both Dutch links and international websites; for example, one can read the Qur'an in many different languages. There is also a link to the Dutch youth organization Salaam, an initiative of Muslim youths from different ethnic backgrounds. The organization started as part of the international website www.muslims.net but since 1998 has had its own address. The website explains the organization's goals and activities, and provides information and discussion forums about Islam. Its purpose is to inform Dutch society about Islam and the Islamic way of life, and to provide converts with support. The organization writes and produces Islamic material and has an online bookshop. It also runs a mailing list, which is accessible to anybody interested in discussing Islamic issues.

According to an email from one of the moderators (people who monitor the posted messages), in 2000 the list had around 260 members. However, the number fluctuates, illustrating the dynamics of such a list. Not every member of the mailing list is an active participant: most are passive users (as I am) and never post messages. Only a small group regularly post messages, although the composition of the group changes over the course of time. A year ago some active members left, and now the discussion on the list is rather quiet: I used to receive between five and 20 emails a day, whereas nowadays I receive just a few.

What kinds of questions were raised during the period covered by my research? Many of the emails were of a practical, informative nature, for instance, announcing meetings or giving the addresses of mosques, Islamic schools, shops selling *halal* food and Muslim bookshops. The themes of the conversations were fairly diverse, ranging from the correct interpretation of Islamic duties to Dutch stereotypes about Muslims. The conversations also reflected current events; for example, during Ramadan and other Islamic feasts, numerous emails concerning these topics were posted. And whenever a popular television programme paid attention to Islam—and most of these programmes presented a stereotypical perspective—it generated long lists of messages. Local news was not the only focus of avid interest, however: international conflicts involving Muslims (such as the Palestinian conflict and the 9/11 attacks) also engendered a lively discussion among the subscribers.

Now that I have presented some general characteristics of the list, I will elaborate in greater detail three themes that came up on it, namely: (a) the position of women in Islam; (b) the stereotypical way Islam is presented in Western society, and (c) the 9/11 attacks in America, the aftermath of which clearly revealed the Western anti-Islam attitude, according to the mailing list participants. I used a discourse analysis of the posted messages on the discussion list, for in virtual debates meanings are produced through texts. Texts are seen as a site in which participants create social meanings and form social identities.²⁴

Projecting Muslim Women

A month before Ramadan 1999–2000, a woman asked whether the use of make-up during fasting was permitted. The question fuelled a fairly heated debate: about 50 messages were posted within just four days. One man said that although he realizes that women wear make-up for themselves, its use could unintentionally lead to adultery, because it is difficult for men to suppress their feelings for women. Fashionably dressed women make it very difficult for men to avert their eyes. Therefore, women should wear make-up only for the benefit of their husbands. Women criticized this stereotypical view of their gender. They stressed that they used make-up only for themselves and stated that they were proud to be Muslim women.

One woman tried to broaden the debate by discussing the role of men. Why, she asked, should women always restrain their passions? After all, men could contribute to a healthy society by not committing adultery. A few men agreed with her; one, though, explained the special position of women in Islam, namely, how women are the core of the community and why it is so important that they maintain their purity. One of the moderators wrote that men should not blame women for their own (i.e. men's) weakness. To illustrate his argument, he gave an example of a scooter thief who blamed scooter owners for making life too difficult for those who do not own such a vehicle. Should scooter owners have to lock up their scooter or disguise it as a simple bike, he asked, so that thieves would not have to overcome the temptation?

However, the messages posted by men tended to promulgate the view that Muslim women ought to know that they are not allowed to dress up outside the home. They legitimized their arguments by referring to the Qur'an and criticizing individual interpretations of Islam. No sooner did this discussion die out than another began. The immediate cause was a popular television programme, in which a young Muslim woman claimed that the Qur'an does not require women to wear a headscarf. This provoked numerous emails stressing that women should cover themselves; the subscribers supported their view by referring to official Islamic sources. One of the

moderators emphasized that men and women are equal in Islam, but that they have different tasks. In his opinion, this is not the case in the West: Western women leave their children in day-care so that they can go to work. In addition, they have to do the housekeeping and be a good wife to their husband. In Islam, it is not the women but the men who are obliged to labour and to support their families.

The Dutch Stereotypes

Another topic that gave rise to many outraged emails and heated debates was the way Islam is presented in Dutch society (January 2000). The subscribers said that Muslims in the Netherlands are not free to practise their own faith but have to adopt Dutch culture. One person asked for an explanation of what adopting Dutch culture was supposed to entail. Another was afraid that he was obliged to replace his religion with Dutch norms and values. He contended that Dutch people want Muslims to see their religion as a sort of coat, one which they can simply put on or take off depending on the occasion. In fact, he said, the Dutch envy his religion and detest true believers. He wondered whether he is no longer allowed to have his wife and daughter wear a headscarf, whether he would be forced to socialize with homosexuals and whether he would have to burn candles at Christmas. 'If we listen to the Dutch', he warned, 'we will become like them'. He concluded his provocative standpoint with the statement that unbelievers will never accept believers.

All the respondents agreed with the view that Dutch people consider Islam an obsolete religion, one which hinders modernity. Nobody denied the negative stereotyping of Islam in the Netherlands, yet different conclusions were drawn. The supposed Dutch tolerance was criticized because it seems that it is not applied in daily life. For instance, some schoolgirls who asked for a special room at school in which to pray did not receive permission from their headmaster. The girls' request hit the front pages of the newspapers and led to the local council becoming involved in the dispute. Some subscribers were angry about the refusal to provide a prayer room and wondered how they are supposed to attach meaning to their religion and identity only in their spare time. They explained this lack of tolerance as stemming from anxiety about Islam among the Dutch. How can we change these stereotypes if Dutch people do not accept our norms and values? One participant advised being primarily a Muslim, and furthermore to work hard and earn a high income. Most thought that improving the social economic status and controlling the media would be a good solution to all the problems raised. Yet other respondents sought to nuance these views by stressing the Dutch freedom of religion and speech, or by suggesting that one should not generalize about the Dutch: most Dutch people will respect one's choice of religion, as long as one leaves them in peace.

The Consequences of 9/11

The 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the US changed dramatically the type of discussions on the list, and from 9/11 on the discussion was dominated by this topic. In ten days, fifty messages were posted. According to the subscribers, after the attacks every Muslim in the Netherlands was considered a potential terrorist. In the media several incidents of harassment of Muslim schools and mosques were reported; for instance, white power symbols were painted on the walls. The subscribers sent the information they read in the newspapers to the mailing list in order to inform the other

members about these events. Many reported that women wearing a headscarf were threatened or spat at in the street. Other emails mentioned that the windows of Turkish restaurants and of the houses of Muslim families had been broken. Dutch people now openly make racist remarks about Muslims, while such utterances were absolutely taboo before, in the opinion of the subscribers. It was said that Dutch people are now showing their true attitude towards Muslims.

The participants critically commented on the way Islam is represented on the television. They repudiated the association of Islam with terrorism by referring to an article on a Muslim news website that condemns the attack and emphasizes the tolerance in Islam: it holds the human soul in high esteem and considers the attack on innocent human beings a grave sin. It is said that Islam never allows a Muslim to kill the innocent or the helpless. Furthermore, critical messages were posted about the US policy to support Israel and safeguard its interests in oil resources in the Middle East and how Europe forgets this. They showed their international solidarity by referring to the suffering of Muslims in other countries (e.g. Iraq and Sudan) who are victims of the American policy, while it does not seem to bother others in Europe.

Some other participants defined the problem of the anti-Islam attitude in different terms. One criticized the prejudiced information that reaches people and said he hopes the Internet can help to correct this picture. He claimed that there are also many people helping Muslims, but that this is not shown in the media. He feels that as a consequence of the negative attitude, the Muslim community will become stronger than it was before. He observes that in his white middle-class suburb, where 99% of the residents are non-Muslim, there had been no attacks there. Why? The answer is education, he said: most of the people in his neighbourhood are well educated. Conversely, he knows people who live in a quarter with a large non-white ethnic population, yet there the Muslims are abused and slandered. Therefore, in his opinion, education and knowledge are the key tools with which to amend the anti-Islam attitude.

Contents and Discussants on the Mailing Lists

The messages posted to the mailing list concerned several issues. What struck me about the participants was the active participation of women in the discussion about gender issues. They questioned the kinds of religious rules women and sometimes men are required to follow. Given the traditional segregation of the sexes in Islam, this is quite remarkable. The anonymity of the Internet probably makes it easier for women and men to discuss sensitive topics than it is in the physical world. Hence, the mailing list has the potential to transcend the gender barrier.

As far as I could tell, the ethnicity of the participants was never a point of discussion in this particular case. In the Netherlands, Islam is primarily organized on the basis of ethnicity; for instance, the Turkish community usually attends Turkish mosques and the same applies to members of the Moroccan and Surinamese communities.²⁵ Although the policy makers seek to stimulate cooperation between Muslims of different ethnic origins they have not been very successful. On the Internet, however, Moroccans, Turks, Surinamese members and also quite a few Dutch converts used the list for their questions regarding the correct Muslim practice irrespective of ethnicity. Although they had different views on the right interpretation of certain religious duties, these differences were expressed not in an ethnic but in a normative Islamic discourse.

The participation of Dutch converts also seemed to have been accepted rather well. For converts, as Bastani also showed in her research, this particular mailing list was a

very useful forum for information exchange, a forum which does not exist in their direct social environment. The list unites all kinds of people with a different ethnic background; in this respect, the subscribers can be considered—in the terms of Eickelman and Anderson—a new audience.

Dutch converts are not the only ones seeking to find information about Islam; this is also the case with Muslim immigrant youths growing up in the Netherlands. As Anderson and Mandaville pointed out, such a mailing list is a direct resource for Muslim young people constructing their identities in a Western country. It also affords them the opportunity to search on their own terms, independent of their parents' social network or mosque. In a sense, the medium of the Internet strengthens their individual search for a way to attach meaning to their religion, a way that contrasts with the older generation's more collective approach to faith. The first generation, which grew up in various Muslim majority countries, takes practising religion for granted. In observing the discussions I found a tendency for Muslim subscribers to take their religion more into their own hands.

The effect of this mailing list tallies with Jon Anderson's views regarding Islam on the Internet: individual Muslims are united through the medium of the Internet in social networks of communication.²⁶ It is obvious that a debate on the Internet is more public and makes it possible for the list subscribers to form social networks, thus allowing new interpreters of Islam to emerge. And as Anderson—like Mandaville—supposes, this reflects 'a more nuanced diversity of views, settings, projects and expressions of Islam today'.²⁷ I concur that the list is a medium in which all kinds of different views can be expressed and many issues covered. Consequently, not only do people talk on the Internet in new settings, but also most of the topics they discuss are new.

Unfortunately, having read the posted messages, I have my doubts about the balanced dimension of views that Anderson expressed in his article. The moderators of the list seem to be rather powerful, as they can steer discussions in a certain direction by their active participation in the debates. I have noticed, for example, that following the departure of a somewhat liberal moderator, the other moderators have tended to refer to a rather strict interpretation of the Qur'an. In the opinion of these moderators, Muslims must follow the Qur'an and the *Sunnah*, as these sources are not open to discussion or to individual interpretation. From that perspective, they state that Muslims are forbidden to listen to music, because music would make them stray from the right path. From that same frame of reference, they condemn homosexuality. Nevertheless, this view has engendered a lively discussion about the correct Islamic interpretation.

Can Muslim members of the list be described in terms of Benedict Anderson's imagined community? Anderson wrote that although people are not acquainted with each other personally and probably will never meet, they feel some sort of 'comradeship'.²⁸ In a way, this also applies to the members of discussion lists. Most of them are anonymous and thus do not know each other personally. However, because of their shared interests, that does not impede them from writing fairly openly about personal thoughts. A sense of community can only arise from common interests or experiences. Sharing the same religion and living as a Muslim in a Western society strengthens such a feeling. The negative experiences with Dutch attitudes towards Islam, as expressed by a lot of participants, make this loyalty even stronger, allowing them to draw a boundary between believers and non-believers, or to make distinctions between 'us' and 'them'.

Being critical of others stimulates the meaning of unity within the Muslim community and sets its members apart from their secular environment. In that respect, this

belonging is not limited to the Netherlands, but extends to other Muslims world-wide through the expression of feelings of *ummah* with other believers. The events after the 9/11 attacks further increased the loyalty among Muslims while they made the 'Islam phobia' in the Netherlands and other Western countries both stronger and more apparent.²⁹ For instance, Asad noted increased hostility towards Muslim Americans and Muslims world-wide as a consequence of the 9/11 attacks and the war against Islamic terrorists.³⁰

Conclusion

Members of the Dutch mailing list especially raise topics that are related to their religion and to the way Islam is represented in society. As in Bastani's research, subscribers use the list to express themselves as Muslims living in a Western society. This forum fills a need by answering their questions and sharing their doubts or experiences in the physical world. Referring to the division between the physical and the virtual world, not only is there an interplay between these two worlds, but the virtual world mirrors the issues the Muslim members perceive as important in the physical world. They are involved not only in debates about the right interpretation of religion but also with international feelings of loyalty with other Muslims world-wide.

With reference to the findings of Mandaville and Anderson discussed above, one may wonder whether these questions are as new as these authors assumed. Is it so striking that young people go online to discuss aspects of their religion? I think that this is indeed the case, and that the mailing list has become in that sense a new virtual venue for Muslims. For one thing, most of the subscribers probably will never meet in the physical world, because of their different backgrounds and places of residence. Their common interest in Islam unites them on a virtual forum, while each participant has his or her individual motives.

For the Dutch converts, the list is a simple way to get in touch with other believers whom they do not easily meet in their immediate environment. The list not only transcends ethnic boundaries but also establishes links between the gendered communities of men and women. The anonymity of the Internet facilitates a discussion between women and men, which is more difficult in the physical world because of the traditional gender segregation. Their common interest in Islam allows the members to form a virtual or an imagined community, which provides them with the opportunity to articulate their Muslim identity on their own terms, independent of the older generation. Furthermore, this sense of community is being strengthened by the increasing hostility towards Muslims in the surrounding society.

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